

Commentary on “The Ghosts of Monotheism: Heaven, Fortune and Universalism in Early Chinese and Greco-Roman Historiography”

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Abstract: This commentary on Marsili’s “The Ghosts of Monotheism” confines itself to some general observations on the theoretical claims of the article. While it is in full agreement with the author on the need to historicize “religion” in studies of pre-modern and non-Western histories it also suggests that this task, far from not being undertaken, has been very much at the forefront in disciplines that are either directly dealing with religion, such as religious studies, or with the problem of what constitutes “history”, in the study of say, pre-modern South Asia. The commentary, therefore, suggests that, rather than being an inter-disciplinary problem, the lack of historicization of “religion” might well be an intra-disciplinary one.

The paper, rich in a comparative perspective, attempts to show, through its detailed analysis of early histories of both the Chinese and the Greco-Roman worlds at the turn of the first pre-Christian millennium that we have historiographies from that period that adopt radically different approaches to that of post-Christian historical writing traditions. In showing this, the author suggests, we can not only question the “hegemony of monotheism” that underlies “Western” history writing but also, more crucially, interrogate the links a monotheistic universalism establishes between “religion and moral, ethnic, and national identities.” Further, such an interrogation would, instead, foster a truly intercultural approach that eschews ethnocentrism. The commentator on this paper is not an expert on either Chinese or Greco-Roman historiography apart from being well aware that a great deal of rich scholarship exists on both Sima Qian and Polybius. Nevertheless, as someone whose own work on pre-modern South Asian, more specifically South Indian, Tamil religion is strongly informed by an interest in the historiography of religions, I would like to confine myself to some general observations that pertain to the theoretical claims of this article.

To return to Polybius and Sima Qian, the analysis of their historiographical approaches in this article yields rich insights regarding historical narratives and the ways in which the stories of people in pre-modernity are told. Thus, the author shows

us that there existed widely differentiated ways of considering the history of societies, depending on one's location. For Polybius, dealing with the rise of Rome at the turn of the first millennium, the emergence of new political realities seemed to necessitate a new kind of god but one who "constituted an intermediate stage towards a rationalistic refutation of the role of the divine in history" (Marsili 2014: 66). The figure that seemed to fulfill this purpose was Tychê, or Fortune, who tests men's skills and capacities even while allowing events to converge to one end. In Sima Qian, by contrast, if "Heaven" is the ordering principle then the author is at pains to stress that it has to be understood as serving different functions in different contexts. Thus, it can even be that, "it does not present any extra-human connotation. It is an empty word that can be used to glorify one's contingent aims. It is connected to adaptability and receptiveness rather than to constants and absolutes" (Marsili 2014: 62).

In the final analysis, the author suggests that neither Polybius nor Sima Qian conceived of "a universalistic, super-ethnic religion that propounded the unity of the metaphysical, moral, and empirical realms. Their worldview was not influenced by monotheism or by its conscious rejection" (Marsili 2014: 46). So far, so good. As extensive studies of the epic texts of India such as the Mahābhārata have shown (Van Buitenen 1973; Hildebeitel 2011; Fitzgerald 2004)—if we are to acknowledge the historical aims of texts such as these—then we must also acknowledge that the coherence of the narrative framework, like that of Polybius or Sima Qian, does not rely on monotheistic principles. In an epic like the Mahābhārata too, destiny or daiva functions to hold together the plot as much if not more than divine, monotheistic interventions. In other words, cross-cultural analyses of non-Judeo Christian historically or semi-historically intended texts reveal many points of similarity regarding non-Abrahamic paradigms of historical writing. Therefore, one could hardly take exception to the author's call for a historicization of "religion" as a precondition perhaps for cross-cultural, historical analysis. The charge though, of the lack of historicization, would have been better substantiated in this paper if the author could have shown how this has affected, say, previous analyses of the very materials he has worked on for this paper.

The author suggests that a great deal of historical interpretation falls short of historicizing the concept of "religion" itself, being driven by some of the implicit striving for teleological coherence and an understanding of "religion" that is based on the Judeo-Christian or Abrahamic models. There is little to argue with the soundness of this theoretical proposition. Nevertheless, and this is the main point I wish to make, being someone who works both in the field of religious studies, on non-Judeo Christian traditions as well as on pre-modern South Asian literatures, one can hardly avoid the paradigm shift that has taken place in the study of "religion" with the deconstruction of both the concept itself as well as its historical formations. A recent example of such a deconstruction would be the work of Arvind Mandair (2009) on the emergence of the modern Sikh religious identity, which builds on the theorization of others on the

concept of “religion” such as that of King (1999), Masuzawa (2005), McCutcheon (1997), and Fitzgerald (2000), to name a few. A second sort of development, not unrelated to the matter at hand, inasmuch as it deals with the issue of historical writings in pre-modernity, is the kind of historical scholarship that probes the construction of “history” itself, seeking to show that texts that might be read as “history” in some pre-modern cultures would not fall within the genre of “history” as we understand it to be in modernity, let alone fulfill the latter’s implicit Judeo-Christian teleology. Here, I am thinking of the work of Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam (2003) on history writing in India in the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. What they have attempted to show is that, if facticity might be considered one of the central features of history writing, then it must be looked for, and can be found in genres other than those considered traditional to it. In other words, historians who have expanded the notion of which genres of narrative literature deal with history in pre-modernity, and have taken into account particularly narratives that are not concerned primarily with the delineation of a linear time framework, are even less likely to adopt a Judeo-Christian and monotheistic theological bias in their own scholarship. Finally, as I have shown in my own work, when histories of religions came to be written in India after the emergence of historical writing as a discipline, the historiographical approaches of traditionalist scholars, far from being an unsophisticated adaptation of Judeo-Christian teleology, were, in fact, constructed with an acute awareness of both its limitations and its dangers (Raman 2011). In summing up, I would suggest that the author’s plea for the historicization of “religion” as a prerequisite for the study of ancient and non-Western histories has long been recognized both by those in religious studies as well as those working on pre-modern historical traditions of South Asia. It perhaps just remains to be more explicitly acknowledged and dealt with by those writing or engaging with texts in the author’s own area of expertise.

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